

PYGMY KILLER WHALE (*Feresa attenuata*): Western North Atlantic Stock

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

The pygmy killer whale is distributed worldwide in tropical to sub-tropical waters (Jefferson *et al.* 1994). Pygmy killer whales are assumed to be part of the cetacean fauna of the tropical western North Atlantic. The paucity of sightings is probably due to a naturally low number of groups compared to other cetacean species. Sightings in the more extensively surveyed northern Gulf of Mexico occur in oceanic waters (Mullin *et al.* 1994; Mullin and Fulling, 2004). Sightings of pygmy killer whales were documented in all seasons during aerial surveys of the northern Gulf of Mexico between 1992 and 1998 (Hansen *et al.* 1996; Mullin and Hoggard 2000). The western North Atlantic population is provisionally being considered one stock for management purposes. Additional morphological, genetic and/or behavioral data are needed to provide further information on stock delineation.

POPULATION SIZE

The numbers of pygmy killer whales off the U.S. or Canadian Atlantic coast are unknown, and seasonal abundance estimates are not available for this stock, since it was rarely seen in any surveys. A group of 6 pygmy killer whales was sighted during a 1992 vessel survey of the western North Atlantic off of Cape Hatteras, North Carolina, in waters >1500 m deep (Hansen *et al.* 1994), but this species was not sighted during subsequent surveys (Anon. 1999; Anon. 2002; Mullin and Fulling 2003). Abundance was not estimated for pygmy killer whales from the 1992 vessel survey because the sighting was not made during line-transect sampling effort; therefore, the population size of pygmy killer whales is unknown.

Minimum Population Estimate

Present data are insufficient to calculate a minimum population estimate for this stock.

Current Population Trend

There are insufficient data to determine the population trends for this stock.

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

Current and maximum net productivity rates are unknown for this stock. For purposes of this assessment, the maximum net productivity rate was assumed to be 0.04. This value is based on theoretical modeling showing that cetacean populations may not grow at rates much greater than 4% given the constraints of their reproductive history (Barlow *et al.* 1995).

POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

Potential Biological Removal level (PBR) is the product of the minimum population size, one-half the maximum productivity rate, and a recovery factor (MMPA Sec. 3.16 U.S.C. 1362; Wade and Angliss 1997). The minimum population size is unknown. The maximum productivity rate is 0.04, the default value for cetaceans. The “recovery” factor, which accounts for endangered, depleted, threatened stocks, or stocks of unknown status relative to optimum sustainable population (OSP), is assumed to be 0.5 because this stock is of unknown status. PBR for the western North Atlantic stock of pygmy killer whales is unknown.

ANNUAL HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

Fishery Information

Detailed fishery information is reported in Appendix III. Total annual estimated average fishery-related mortality and serious injury to this stock during 1999-2003 was zero pygmy killer whales, as there were no reports of mortality or serious injury to pygmy killer whales (Yeung 2001; Garrison 2003; Garrison and Richards, 2004). There has historically been some take of this species in small cetacean fisheries in the Caribbean (Caldwell and Caldwell 1971).

Other Mortality

From 1999-2003, 2 pygmy killer whales were reported stranded between Maine and Puerto Rico (Table 1). The total includes 1 animal stranded in South Carolina and 1 in Georgia in 2003, though there were no indications of human interactions for these stranded animals.

Stranding data probably underestimate the extent of fishery-related mortality and serious injury because all of the marine mammals that die or are seriously injured may not wash ashore, nor will all of those that do wash ashore

necessarily show signs of entanglement or other fishery-interaction. Finally, the level of technical expertise among stranding network personnel varies widely as does the ability to recognize signs of fishery interaction.

STATE	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	TOTALS
North Carolina	0	0	0	0	0	0
South Carolina	0	0	0	0	1	1
Georgia	0	0	0	0	1	1
Florida	0	0	0	0	0	0
Puerto Rico	0	0	0	0	0	0
TOTALS	0	0	0	0	2	2

STATUS OF STOCK

The status of pygmy killer whales, relative to OSP, in the U.S. western North Atlantic EEZ is unknown. The species is not listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. There are insufficient data to determine the population size or trends and PBR cannot be calculated for this stock. No fishery-related mortality and serious injury has been observed since 1999; therefore, total fishery-related mortality and serious injury rate can be considered insignificant and approaching zero mortality and serious injury. This is not a strategic stock.

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